

THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
13 February 1979

Article appeared
on page A-4

Embarrassment and Blunders Mark Carter's Energy Policy

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The way things are going, Jimmy Carter would have trouble getting people to turn off the lights in the interest of conservation.

The energy crisis — if that's what it is — brings together a number of blunders and embarrassments that have brought him to a new crisis of esteem and a sharp plunge in his job rating, which is down to 28 percent in the latest polls.

Asking people to make sacrifices when they can see for themselves what the trouble is is one thing. But asking them to be "patriotic" when they suspect that they haven't been told the whole story is quite another.

Skepticism about oil shortages was born in the wake of the 1973-74 oil embargo, which was handled with good cheer and resourcefulness by many citizens who later learned that the "crisis" had been greatly assisted in its development by oil companies' withholding supplies in the interests of higher prices.

THAT SKEPTICISM haunted the 18-month struggle over the energy bill, the passage of which was supposed to avert the kind of problems we may or may not face as a result of strikes in Iran.

But at the heart of the problem is the president's totally ambivalent attitude toward what he once called "the moral equivalent of war." If it is of the paramount, overriding concern, why did he conduct relations with two major oil-producing countries, Iran and Mexico, with such frivolous disregard of the effect on us?

The closing of the oilfields in Iran was greeted with something like ecstasy by Energy Secretary James Schlesinger, who is ever on the watch for something that can be taken as a green light to rush out and tell us that the sky is falling so he can raise oil prices.

During the tortuous progress of the energy bill, he periodically conjured up the spectre of grass growing in the streets. When our client, the shah, finally packed it in, Schlesinger rushed forward to warn us of a crisis

"prospectively more serious than the 73-74 embargo."

TREASURY SECRETARY W. Michael Blumenthal tore in behind Schlesinger to say it wasn't that bad. Schlesinger's apocalyptic predictions had produced a run on the dollar, making things worse on the inflation front — a side-effect that might have been avoided.

The president in his press conference took a stance roughly in the middle. The situation is "not crucial now" and we could offset the current reduction in the Iranian supply if we heeded Schlesinger's call for voluntary conservation.

The handling of the revolution in Iran also was the result of divided counsel within the administration. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance suggested that we not panic at the thought of the shah's departure — a view subsequently espoused in the secret report of George Ball — but when it mattered, Zbigniew Brzezinski clamored successfully for all-out, unconditional support of the shah.

After the shah left for his winter vacation, we endorsed the regime of his chosen successor, who also bit the dust. We seem to have proceeded not with a thought to energy but only to maintaining our right to interfere, as we always have, in the affairs of Iran. The result is we have no friends among those who have their fingers on the spigot.

THAT, OF COURSE, leads us to another current embarrassment, the CIA and the performance of Carter's hand-picked director, his Annapolis

classmate, Stansfield Turner. The CIA, drawing on its incestuous relationship with the shah's secret police, SAVAK, gave the White House bad dope — not to worry, they kept saying, as millions marched in the streets.

We have become accustomed over recent years to hearing of the botch the CIA made of things it was not supposed to be doing. Iran provides the first instance of its inability to do the one thing it is clearly supposed to do, which is collect information on

which rational foreign-policy decisions can be made.

No intelligence shortfall has produced the crisis with Mexico. Here the failure has been one of common sense.

The discovery of oil and gas reserves next door has been treated by Schlesinger as a calamity. He has given it a wetback's welcome. He has practically told us we would not want our homes heated or our cars run by stuff from a neighbor that had been vulgar enough to nationalize its treasure.

WHEN THE MEXICANS came up here last year to make a deal he insulted them. When they came back to try again, he refused to see them.

First he told us that their supplies were too expensive. Then he said they were too cheap and might create havoc among our own producers.

The result of his advance work has been to unleash a wave of anti-Americanism on the eve of the president's visit.

Carter's press conference statement that he was "proud" of Mexico's bonanza sounded a bit odd. That's what he said about Bert Lance.

If he's going to convince the country to cooperate, he has first to convince people that he understands the situation. People will walk and shiver if they're sure it's necessary. So far, they have no evidence that the energy crisis exists anywhere but in the boardrooms of the oil companies — and in the White House, where the man in charge doesn't seem to have made any final decisions about how important energy really is.